

History of the Virginia A. Blanchard (aka No. 11, Rogerson, Whitin, North Uxbridge) School Part One

When the Pilgrims and Puritans came to Massachusetts Bay Colony, they came to tame a wild land and start a religious experiment. Not once did they see themselves as being forerunners in public education; to them, the basics in reading the scriptures and being able to sign your name were enough. Nevertheless Massachusetts Bay Colony was one of the first colonies to require education and Boston had the first publicly supported schools (common schools). Early schoolhouses were usually the meetinghouse which doubled as a church long before the constitutional requirement of separation of church and state. Sparse supplies indoctrinated America's youth in the scriptures and sums but these old schools were achieving their first purpose, to raise good Christian men and women. As the country stood firmly on its fledgling feet, it looked toward its youth as the way to pave the future. We can use the Virginia A. Blanchard (North Uxbridge) School as a learning tool in the way education developed in Massachusetts.

In the Act of Incorporation of Uxbridge, the General Court attached the provision that a schoolmaster be provided to instruct the youth in reading and writing. In 1732, the town voted to have a school master in each part of the town proportionately, with the selectmen appointing the place where the schools were to be kept and providing the schoolmaster or dame. The first public school teacher was John Read, Sr. The year 1760 saw the town divided into thirteen districts and children of certain families attending a specified school; each district was to have a sum of money allotted to it in proportion to the number of scholars in that district. Thirteen districts remained until 1796 when the number was changed to eleven. ¹

The districts were as follows:

No. 1 Rice City- an 1855 and 1870 map shows the school located across from the Poor Farm on East Hartford Avenue but in 1898 it is located on the corner of East Hartford Avenue and West River Road. It was moved to the old Poor Farm on E. Hartford Ave. adjacent to the West River and is a private residence.

No. 2 Elmdale-all maps show this school located in the same place it stands today on Blackstone St. It was closed as a school in 1951 and used as the Grange Hall till 2006. It has been sold and it slated to be torn down.

No. 3 Albee/Holbrook-all maps show this school located in the same place on Albee Road. Building has been torn down.

No. 4 Rivulet-all maps show this school located in the same place, the junction of Rivulet and N. Main Streets. This building was torn down.

No. 5 Center-all maps show this school located in the same place. The building was on S. Main off of Pleasant St. It was torn down in 1954.

No. 6 Happy Hollow-all maps show the school located in the same place, corner of Mill and Pond Streets. It was moved to Carney Street in 1950 and was used as the Scout House. It is now abandoned and falling to pieces.

¹ 250th Anniversary Book

No. 7 Ironstone -1870 map shows it on Ironstone Road near the Poor Farm. The current building opened in 1914 on Ironstone and Balm of Life Spring Road and is now owned by the South Uxbridge Community Association

No. 8 Aldrich-all maps show the school located in the same place on Aldrich Street. Closed in 1950 it is now a private residence.

No. 9 Scadden-1870 and 1898 it is located on West Street. It is now a private residence.

No. 10 Williams Hill-all maps show it located in the same place, corner of West Hartford Avenue and Williams Street. It is now a private residence.

No. 11 North Uxbridge -now named the Virginian A. Blanchard School. 1870 map shows it located on the corner of Linwood Street and East Hartford Avenue and 1898 shows it located on its current site.

No. 12 Richardson-1855 map locates it off of Douglas Pike, 1870 and 1898 it sits at the corner of Aldrich Street and Douglas Pike. It is no longer standing.

No. 13 Wheelocksville-1855 did not have a district 13, in 1870 and 1898 the school was on the location of Mendon and Henry Streets. It was closed in 1969 and torn down in 1977.

In the early 1800's the number of school districts was fixed at thirteen but the number of schoolhouses depended on town resources and population shifts. Under the district system, towns were to divide their student population by geographic areas and each area was to have a school house. A separate school committee (referred to as a Prudential Committee) governed that district and saw to the needs of the schoolhouse- sufficient heating wood, teaching supplies, teaching staff/salary and sanitation. Some houses were well maintained and generously supplied with wood and adequate teaching staff but other houses were neglected and the learning conditions dangerous. As time marched on, the town had one school committee whose responsibility was to ensure that all scholars were receiving the best education possible in each district.

The origins of the Blanchard School are briefly mentioned in Henry Chapin's address delivered in 1868. *"About 1828, district number eleven was set off from number four (Rivulet), and a house for its use was provided by Mr. Robert Rogerson."*¹ The 1855 map does not have this building marked as a school house so it is evident that it was a building owned by Rogerson who offered it to the town for the children. We know there were students attending school in number eleven because funds were allocated for the scholars during those years. The original location of School House No. 11, according to an 1870 map it was on the corner of Linwood Street and East Hartford Avenue. This building was not a schoolhouse in any sense of the word. It was a building offered by Rogerson for the town to instruct the children of the area and was not suitable at all for the new function assigned to it. Rogerson's School continued to be housed in this building following the fortunes of the man it was named after. When Rogerson fell into financial ruin the mill was taken over by its mortgagers in 1837 and Rogerson's aesthetic view of textile villages will disappear along with him. Mortgagers renamed the mill Uxbridge Cotton Mill and ran it until 1850. It can only be assumed that the Prudential Committee for No. 11 funds were depleted by the collapse of the mill and this is when the deterioration and neglect began.

Since each district school's stipend was directly related to the number of scholars who attended the school, population numbers determined the success of a building. On the next page you will find the population numbers for Uxbridge from 1810-1910. While the town was still a farming community the population was fairly stable. Construction on the Blackstone Canal and early mill labor needs boosted the population slightly. Notice during the recession decade of 1836-37 the population

¹ Address Delivered At The Unitarian Church in Uxbridge, Mass, In 1854, p.186

decreases. This was due to both skilled and unskilled workers looking to other communities for work. But as the factories picked up and production of cloth for the Civil War increases so the population increased accordingly. The immigrant Irish were flowing in, attracted first by labor on the canal then by work in the mills. Vital records books of the era show the first Irish names listed in birth and marriages circa 1850. There was another economic recession just after the Civil War and the population numbers reflect this. The economy turned up and the numbers steadily increased each decade forward. The huge jump between 1900 and 1910 were the Italian and the Polish immigrants moving into town.

| Census Year | Population |
|-------------|------------|
| 1810 | 1404 |
| 1820 | 1551 |
| 1830 | 2086 |
| 1840 | 2004 |
| 1850 | 2457 |
| 1860 | 3133 |
| 1870 | 3058 |
| 1880 | 3111 |
| 1900 | 3599 |
| 1910 | 4671 |

The mill was purchased by the Whitin's in 1850 and they set about to improve the mill and take a stake at making their way in the textile manufacturing field. Much is written about the improvements they brought to the mill itself, like building the brick connector between the two mills, but nothing is written about improvements to the schoolhouse (now referred to as Chas. Whitin's). The next mention we see of the condition of the school in No. 11 is in committee reports from 1865 onward when the committee advocates for the abolishment of the district school system. Reports tell woeful tales of the inadequate and often times abominable conditions of the district schools. Below are a few observations on the inadequacies of the district system made by the Secretary of the Board of Education in his 26th Annual Report.

- *The district system stands in the way of a more perfect organization of the schools*
- *The Prudential Committees, chosen as they are, by the districts, and having no responsibility to the town, and with little inducement to qualify themselves, are not, as a class, so familiar with the best methods of teaching, and the qualifications to make a good teacher*
- *It perpetuates a class of school-houses utterly unfit for use...a standing reproach to the common sense of the people who suffer them to exist*
- *The districts differ in the numbers, wealth, in intelligence, in public spirit¹*

In the year 1863 Massachusetts outlawed the district system and instituted "a uniform town system." It required towns to vote in 1863 and every third year afterwards on the abolishment of the district system. The Uxbridge school committee was in total agreement with the decision of the legislature and quietly rebuked the town for its spring vote not to adopt a town system. In towns that had abolished the district system there was a *"higher grade of teachers employed, the better school-houses,*

¹ School Committee Report 1864-65

furniture, and apparatus obtained for the benefit of the scholars, and a more advanced course of study following as a consequence..."¹ The committee knew the residents were concerned at what cost the oversight of districts schools would mean to the town and the school committee was well aware of the harsh opinions of the town on this matter. The commitment to better education will necessitate years of building improvements, the town will have to pump large sums of money salaries and resources and the committee will have to establish consistent standards of education. They insist that abolishing of the district system will bring desperately needed improvements to the district school houses. *"This improvement has long been needed, --number eleven having no school house of its own, and occupying a building totally unsuited to its necessities; and number four having a school house although comfortable in some respects falls far below the present demands for a school house."*² The committee recommended the re-unification of the two districts, eleven and four, in an effort to better educate the children. Taxpayers resisted abolishment of the district system because they refused to have their taxes increased. Towns received a small amount of money from the state for education. Uxbridge appropriated these funds for direct support of the high school as this was the only school for the *whole town*; all the other money was divided up between the districts for bare necessities. The schools, other than the high school, were completely devoid of teaching "apparatus" because the town had no community appropriation for education. There were no books, maps or other teaching supplies. Twenty-five per cent of the State School Fund money was spent on the high school (1869 total amount spent \$50) and the question was asked, what should be done with the rest of the fund's money. *"What shall be done? Apply the other three fourths received from the State? It deducts so much from the money employed to pay the current expenses of the schools. Raise and appropriate money for this purpose? Somebody's taxes must be higher."*³

The economy of the town was changing, the industrial revolution and its demands dictated the way the town operated and conducted its business. The beleaguered school committee was dealing with the newest evil of the industrial revolution, employment of children in manufactories. The community must understand that *"eight of the sixteen common schools in town, are in manufacturing districts, where there are, and must necessarily be, frequent changes in the scholars, in order that the provisions of the law concerning the employment of children in factories may be carried out with any degree of convenience to parents or employers. Those who have children, many of them at least, need the products of their labor; at the same time they desire to give their children the opportunity to receive such instruction as our common schools are able to impart, to fit them to discharge their duties as American citizens...The other eight districts are farming districts,, and should have their schools kept as best to accommodate such children as parents usually employ in agricultural occupations."*⁴ CHAPTER 285 OF THE ACTS OF 1867 IT IS STATED THAT NO CHILD UNDER THE AGE OF TEN CAN BE EMPLOYED IN A MANUFACTURING ESTABLISHMENT AND NO CHILD BETWEEN THE AGES OF TEN AND FIFTEEN SHALL BE EMPLOYED UNLESS HE HAS ATTENDED SCHOOL AT LEAST THREE MONTHS OF THE YEAR PRECEDING HIS EMPLOYMENT. NO TIME OF LESS THAN SIXTY DAYS OF ACTUAL SCHOOLING WILL COUNT TOWARD THE THREE MONTHS.⁵ So your school term's length depended on which district you lived in. The terms had to be balanced so that children who worked in the mills could fulfill their statutory requirement of 60 days while farming children could accommodate busy seasons such as haying or planting As noted before, each district got a share of the money based on the number of scholars who attended school, so if absenteeism was high, that district lost funds. The committee expressed deep concerns for the number of scholars under the age of ten who were being illegally

¹ School Committee Report 1868-69

² Ibid.

³ School Committee Report 1869-70

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

employed by mills. Another major concern were the number of scholars who were not fulfilling their 60 day requirement and neither the employers nor the parents were concerned¹. The industrial revolution brought wealth and advancement to towns but it also brought the wickedness of child exploitation.

The new school committee kept its promise and slowly improved the learning conditions of the students in the town. Highest priority was to abandon or re-construct the houses then to set about improvements in instruction. In 1872 the Whitin family generously donated the land for a new school for the children in North Uxbridge. The school committee eagerly anticipated this structure, writing in their report, “*We trust, that (it) will be duly appreciated by the children who will enjoy its advantage.*”² The building had two spacious classrooms and held both primary and grammar grades. Weekly reports in the town paper followed the construction and much fanfare greeted the new building. It opened in 1873.

It was in the best interests of the mill owners to have an adequate school centrally located because the growth of the textile industry demanded cheap and constant sources of labor. Having a school adjacent to the mill made it easier for both families and children to work various shifts in the mill. Rogerson, the original mill owner, designed his mill village to be a safe and healthy place for his workers to live and socialize. The area was referred to as Rogerson’s Village and this historic section is recognized as the best example of mill village planning in New England. “*Rogerson provides a small well-planned New England Village complete with a general store, a meeting hall and a dormitory all combined in the Community Building across Hartford Street from the mill.*”³ now known as the Darcey Block.” This store was specifically built for the mill village and the hall over the store was “*dedicated to Christian worship without regard to sect*”⁴. The Methodists first used the hall for worship, then the Baptist Society used it and the Whitin’s continued this tradition after they purchased the mill⁵ furnishing this hall free of charge⁶. Mills were more than employers; they were responsible for the economic well being of both the village and the town. Early newspapers⁷ reported weekly whether the mills were running on full time, fraction of full time, or closed completely due to market or weather. A freshet in the spring or a drought in the summer could shut a mill down and a glut of fabric in the market could deal a blow and cause a slowdown⁸. These conditions would cause the men to seek work elsewhere, either going to surrounding mill towns or working on local farms. The mills were not only the largest employers but also they were also the principal taxpayers; and usually brought the modern conveniences of lights, telephone, water and sewer to the town⁹. Mills provided clean affordable housing for their employees and management, and this helped to encourage workers to remain in the local area (many examples of mill housing remain in Uxbridge and the surrounding communities). The Whitin’s were just continuing the tradition established by Rogerson for caring for the dependants of their work force.

The North End of town began to grow by leaps and bounds and by the turn of the last century it was the commercial center of Uxbridge. As the North End grew, so did the number of children

¹ School Committee Report 1873-74

² School Committee Report 1871-72

³ Crown and Eagle Mills, p. 104

⁴ Chapin, p. 155

⁵ Chapin, p. 108,154

⁶ 250th Anniversary Book, p.24

⁷ Worcester South Compendium 2/21/1874

⁸ Uxbridge Compendium 11/29/1887

⁹ Uxbridge Compendium 10/7/1887; Sprague. P.63, 64

attending No. 11. The North Uxbridge School had been seriously overcrowded for many years and the time had come for some desperately needed action. The school committee in 1884 commended Miss Minnie E. Clark for her ability to handle one of the most difficult schools in town, No. 11. The student population was mostly French children some of whom could not speak a word of English. *"The fact that Miss Clark succeed so well in this difficult and trying school, is evidence that she is a teacher of the best quality, and the committee highly commended the meritorious works she has done."*¹ In 1885 the school committee went to town meeting to get support for expanding the bulging North Uxbridge School. Seating capacity in the winter months was too small when children employed on farms or mills could spare time to attend school. In the previous winter 108 students were enrolled but there was only room for 80 and the town was obliged to furnish space for anyone who wished to attend. The districts of four and eleven will be re-united with shifting of scholars for the best usage of space and teaching time. The Uxbridge Compendium of February 18, 1887 lists two schools for North Uxbridge, making us wonder if the second school was rental space. Some postulated the reluctance to expand the school was because it was believed the school only benefited the French children. The Linwood area, Maple Street specifically, was the cultural center of the French immigrants. Tensions came to a head in the year 1885, when North Uxbridge filed for permission to split from Uxbridge and join the town of Northbridge. Parents were angry over the poor school conditions (Rivulet and Linwood parents especially), and feared the long and hazardous railroad tracks and river embankments that their children had to walk to school. Residents were also angry because the town's proposed water system was not coming down into North Uxbridge, leaving this end of town with an unsafe and unsanitary water supply. A big bone of contention between "North Enders" and Uxbridge was the refusal of the police and fire crews to cover the area, leaving coverage to Northbridge. Police claimed that they had been thrown out of the bowrie section in Linwood one too many times and refused to go there on calls. When the secession was defeated, it was discovered that the rail road was behind the entire movement to split the town. The division of the town would be in their best interests because they were going to build a huge station at Whitin's and they could use the land in Uxbridge, thereby eliminating the need to build a station in each town.

It will not be till 1900 when the old school gets its addition and once again it is through the generosity of the Whitin family. They donate more land in front of the old school and the construction began. The new addition opened in October of 1900 to a happy group of children and became one of the most vibrant and integral assets of the Uxbridge School system for generations of North End families. Rev. Hopkins, member of the building committee, wrote a glowing report on the features and wonders of the new school. *"The inside finish is of first quality North Carolina pine, covered with one coat of shellac and two coats of hard oil finish. The floors and stair treads are of the best maple flooring, thoroughly kiln dried..Cutting, Carleton and Cutting of Worcester were the architects and Rankin and Woodside of Worcester, the builders. The total cost of the building, thoroughly furnished and ready for use, was about \$16,000."* The school was the first school building the town ever hired a professional architectural firm to design.

The mill continued to prosper and the population of the North End continued to boom. The French who by now were here for several generations built both the Good Shepherd Church and Catholic school (referred to as "The French School"). Adding to the culture of the North End were the new immigrants, the Italians. The North End began to build its reputation as a political melting pot and was the birthplace of some of the more active politicians. Ethnic pride of both the French and Italians complemented their pride in their new country. They set to work to build a better life for

¹ School Committee Report 1885

themselves and their children and the old No. 11 schoolhouse was the nexus for this energy. North Enders were depicted in newspapers as loud and raucous and a perfect example of their vigor was in 1918. North End Italians and French held an Armistice parade to celebrate the end of the war. It was a parade for the record books. This power, determination and fierce independence, (remember they had threatened to secede once already), will drive this town to prominence among their neighboring communities.

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